

**Religious houses, violence,
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Religious houses, violence, and the limits of political consensus in early medieval León (NW Iberia)*

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This paper explores violence against religious houses as an indicator of the limits of political negotiation and consensus building in early medieval polities. It analyses records of attacks against religious houses and clerics from León (NW Iberia) that escape traditional interpretations of violence as a tool in the negotiation of social relations, and construes the events as an expression of local social cleavages. In so doing, it provides a guideline for probing similar records in ways that might illuminate aspects of social relations and dynamics otherwise obscured by the dominant themes of the documentary sources from this period.

Middle Ages; 10th Century; Local societies; Social inequality; Violence; Churches; Monasteries.

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Abbreviations: Ast = *Colección documental de la Catedral de Astorga*; BGD = *Becerro Galicano de San Millán de la Cogolla*; Cardena = *Colección documental del monasterio de San Pedro de Cardena*; Cel = *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Celanova*; Coruña = *La Coruña: fondo antiguo*; CP = *Colección diplomática de la catedral de Pamplona*; DEPA = *Diplomática española del periodo astur*; Li = *Colección documental del archivo de la Catedral de León I*; Lii = *Colección documental del archivo de la Catedral de León II*; Liii = *Colección documental del archivo de la Catedral de León III*; LM = *Livro de Mumadona*; LV = *Leges Visigothorum*; OD = *Colección documental del monasterio de Santa María de Otero de las Dueñas*; Si = *Colección Diplomática del monasterio de Sahagún I*; Sii = *Colección diplomática del monasterio de Sahagún II*; Samos = *El tumbo de San Julián de Samos*; SJPU = *Cartulario de San Juan de la Peña*; Sobrado = *Tumbos del monasterio de Sobrado de los Monjes*; TCel = *O tombo de Celanova*; Valpuesta = *Los becerros gótico y galicano de Valpuesta*.

1. Violence, churches and the problem of early medieval dispute records

Sometime in early 963 in León, in the north-west Iberian peninsula, a man called Lupi, together with a certain Agila and a group of unnamed people, broke into the house of a priest called Helyas and a nun called Sabildi¹. They held a group of nine people for several hours, causing injuries to them, and then set fire to the house and its goods. The episode, about which we only have a brief, incidental account, stands out in the corpus of early medieval Leonese charters for a very particular reason: although the text does not explicitly say so, there are grounds to believe that the building in question was in fact a religious house.

This is one among only a handful of brief references to attacks against religious houses and clerics in early medieval León. In one exceptional instance, the protagonist was a nameless crowd, which assaulted a monastery in the city of León upon hearing that the nuns had committed adultery and some had gotten pregnant². In the rest of the cases, the attackers were named, non-aristocratic individuals acting against churches and monasteries in rural locations, either alone or, most frequently, at the head of small groups of attackers. These events stand in stark contrast to what is portrayed in most charters from these centuries and in the related historiography, namely that this was a period in which individuals and families of very varied social standing strove to found religious houses – the so-called proprietary churches and monasteries – as a means to consolidate and enhance their social position³. Conflicts over their control were not infrequent, but in León recorded attacks against churches and monasteries most commonly report either destruction caused by Muslim troops from Al-Andalus, or the appropriation of ecclesiastical property by aristocrats⁴. How, then, are we to explain this other sort of attacks?

These records are part of a few dozen incidental references to violent actions, from petty theft to sexual assault and homicide, extant in León's early medieval written record. The charters mention the episodes only in passing, either to justify the payment of a fine – which, when recorded, are usually paid in land – or to explain how a piece of land had been acquired, and thus to legitimise the capacity of an actor to dispose of it⁵. This reflects the overall nature of the charter record, which mainly comprises records of land trans-

¹ Li360 (963).

² Li278 (954). The episode is reminiscent of the religious riots studied in Zemon Davis, *The rites of violence*.

³ See Wood, *The Proprietary Church*. For Spain, a fundamental text remains Orlandis Rovira, *Los monasterios familiares*.

⁴ For a sample of charters with such accounts, see Li17 (904); Li34 (915); Si340 (988); Liii803 (1023). Cf. Sirantoine, *La guerra contra los musulmanes*. Ecclesiastical concerns about the appropriation of church land are expressed in chapter IV of the *Fuero de León*, a legal code passed by Alfonso V in 1017. See Martínez Díez, *Fuero de León*. Cf. Alfonso, *Judicial Rhetoric*. For attacks against churches in a later period, see de los Reyes Aguilar, *Arsonists, Thieves and Clerics*.

⁵ For their characterisation as 'incidental records', see Davies, *Windows on Justice*, p. 40. Cf. Alfonso, *El formato de la información judicial*. The website *Procesos Judiciales en las sociedades*

actions, most of them made on behalf of ecclesiastical institutions⁶. Because of this, the information they provide is usually minimal and one-sided, and sometimes conforms to well-established ecclesiastical discourses. Despite these difficulties, they constitute the only available window on different forms of violence beyond those most forthcoming and stereotyped in the sources – warfare, conflicts between kings and aristocrats, ruthless aristocratic domination, and peasant resistance – and are thus fundamental in exploring a side of social relationships that would otherwise remain obscure⁷.

The study of violence in medieval societies has usually fed narratives on state formation and the civilizing process, whereby a society's degree of violence is taken as an indicator of the strength of its state institutions⁸. Other publications have helped situate the analysis of violence within the formation of social relationships, especially between lords and peasants, paying particular attention to its discursive dimension in the course of conflicts and as a form of political communication⁹. This paper adopts a different perspective, and aims to assess attacks against religious houses within the more quotidian forms of social conflict in early medieval localities, while at the same time considering how they fit into the interplay between local politics and broader social and political determinants¹⁰. To do this, it draws on earlier processual approaches, construing violence as a particular expression of broader social conflicts, while at the same time seeking to escape a functionalist interpretation of violence as a tool in the regulation of social tensions¹¹. This is not

medievals del norte peninsular (siglos IX-XI), < <http://prj.csic.es/> > [accessed 08/04/2020], identifies and provides access to all judicial records from NW Iberia.

⁶ For an overview of the charter record for NW Iberia, with a focus on dispute records, see Davies, *Windows on Justice*, pp. 10-17.

⁷ As an introduction to each of these topics, see, on warfare, Isla Frez, *Ejército, sociedad y política*; on conflicts between aristocrats, Pérez, *Rebelles, infideles, traditores*; on aristocratic domination and peasant resistance, Pastor, *Resistencias y luchas campesinas*.

⁸ Cf. the historiographical review in McHaffie, *Law and violence*, pp. 3-9. For an overview of approaches to violence in the Middle Ages see Brown, *Violence in medieval europe*; Gauvard, *Violence et ordre public*; Miller, *Getting a Fix on Violence*; Skoda, *Medieval Violence*; and more specifically for the early medieval period, *Violence and society*.

⁹ Algazi, *Pruning peasants*; Bisson, *Tormented Voices*. Fiore, *Il rituale della violenza* (see Fiore, *Il mutamento signorile*, for context); McHaffie, *Law and violence*.

¹⁰ On this subject I have followed recent work on the history of protest. For an overview, see Navickas, *What happened to class?*. Specifically on violence, see the approach taken in, among others, Griffin, *Affecting Violence*; Griffin, *'Cut down by some cowardly miscreants'*; Griffin, *Violent Captain Swing?*; McDonagh, *Disobedient objects*; McDonagh, *Making and Breaking Property*; Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence*. On micro-history and local approaches as a feature of the recent history of protest, see Griffin, *Protest, Politics and Work*, p. 13; Navickas, *Protest History or the History of Protest?*, p. 6. On the need to contemplate the multi-scalar nature of protests, see Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*, pp. 18-19. On the relationships between early medieval local societies and their overarching worlds, see *Scale and Scale Change*; and *Polity and Neighbourhood*.

¹¹ Cf. Cheyette, *Suum cuique tribuere*; Gears, *Vivre en conflit*; White, *Feuding and Peacemaking*; cf. Alfonso, *Litigios por la tierra*; McHaffie, *Law and violence*; White, *Tenth-Century Courts*. For an anthropological perspective, see Schröder and Schmidt, *Introduction: violent imaginaries and violent practices*.

to deny that actors used violence as part of their disputation strategies, nor that in particular circumstances it may have contributed to ease certain social strains, or at least to reach a certain social balance. Rather, the aim is to consider what other motives may have led certain conflicts in the localities to take a violent turn¹², and what other social effects this may have had, thereby delving further into the complexity of early medieval local societies¹³.

To achieve this aim, the article first provides a general overview of conflicts over religious houses in early medieval northern Iberia, thus identifying broader patterns of contention over churches and monasteries. It then focuses on the cases from León, providing a closer look at the socio-political context in which they occurred and comparing differences and similarities between them. Finally, it considers attacks against religious houses in the light of analogous violent events as a means to enhance our understanding of the social dynamics behind such episodes. Ultimately, the aim is to provide a better appreciation of the micro-dynamics of violence in early medieval localities, and of the strategies we can develop in order to bring them to light.

2. *Conflicts over churches and monasteries: an overview of NW Iberia*

Charters from tenth-century north-western Iberia widely attest to lay owners and patrons of churches and monasteries from a variety of social backgrounds, ranging from local elites to aristocrats. These owners and patrons could either possess them as a whole or hold shares, and could benefit from them in a variety of ways. Churches and monasteries satisfied spiritual needs, from everyday religious practice to fundamental rites such as burial, and were also an economic asset, both because of the revenues they generated as well as the assets they possessed. Owning a church or a monastery was a sign of social prestige, and they functioned as hubs around which client networks could be built, as donations to such centres often expressed allegiance to its owners or patrons. At the same time, granting a church or a monastery to a bishopric or an abbey was a means of becoming a client and even a member of such institutions, and thus to profit from the spiritual, social, and economic benefits that such membership entailed¹⁴. Importantly, such grants did not necessarily en-

¹² Cf. Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, p. 26.

¹³ For recent work using conflict to illuminate social differences within local communities, see Carvajal Castro, *Collective Action*; Lazzari, *Comunità rurali*; Lazzari, *La tutela del patrimonio fiscale*; Santos Salazar, *Fiscal lands*. See also Rembold, *Conquest and Christianization*, pp. 85-140, for a recent account of the *Stellinga* along similar lines. Cf. Wickham, *Space and Society*; and Wickham, *Looking forward*, which provide an overview of social conflicts in early medieval societies. More broadly for the Middle Ages, see *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*. For an overview of recent work on social inequalities in early medieval local societies, see the contributions to *Social Inequality in Early Medieval Europe*.

¹⁴ For an overview of the functions performed by churches and monasteries in early medieval NW Spain, see Pérez, *El control de lo sagrado*. In Spain, most works on lay ownership and patronage of religious houses have focused on aristocratic patronage. See, among others, Loring

tail losing control over the house; agreements could be reached regarding the institution of certain celebrations, the distribution of rents, the appointment of priests, or the daily management of its patrimony¹⁵. In examining grants of churches and monasteries, therefore, it is important to consider not only the ties that were thus created, but also how they might have affected the different people whose interests coalesced around them, as well as the constraints and opportunities they generated for further social interaction.

Conflicts over churches and monasteries varied depending on the actors involved and the issues at stake. Ownership was obviously one of them, but so were the many different aspects that revolved around the granting of a religious house, the appointment of its clergy, and the conditions of its tenure. An overview of NW Iberia will enable us to consider different scenarios before focusing on the handful of Leonese cases¹⁶. The following is not intended as an exhaustive study of conflicts over churches and monasteries, but rather as a contextual aid in their analysis.

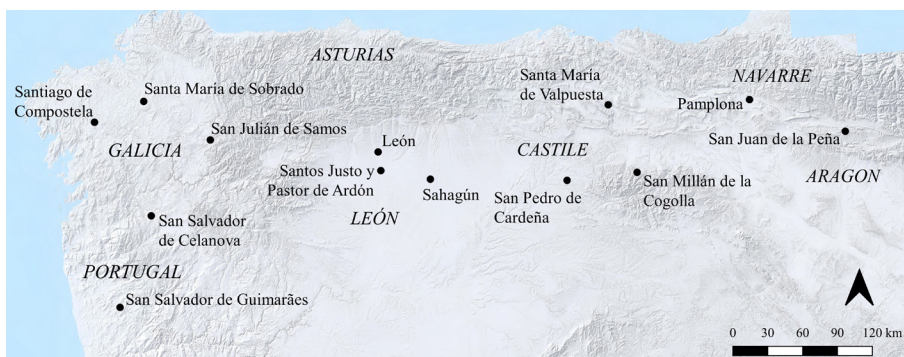


Fig. 1. Main ecclesiastical sites mentioned in the text.

Competition over ownership is most evident in conflicts between high-standing patrons, both lay and ecclesiastical, who were interested in local churches and monasteries as patrimonial hubs and local centres of power. Fruela, a son of King Alfonso IV (r. 926-931), and Samos, one of the most important monasteries in Galicia, engaged in a dispute over the control of the church of Santa María y San Fiz de Loureiro (Galicia). What was ultimately at stake, as the charter reveals, were the tributes paid by the dependants of these

García, *Nobleza e iglesias propias*; Martín Viso, *Monasterios y poder aristocrático*; Martínez Sopena, *Fundaciones monásticas y nobleza*; Martínez Sopena, *Aristocracias, monacato y reformas*. Recent work has paid more attention to the relationships between local elites and local religious houses, on which see Quirós Castillo and Santos Salazar, *Founding and Owning Churches*; and from the viewpoint of local priests, Davies, *Local priests*.

¹⁵ The diversity of such arrangements is considered in Orlandis Rovira, *Los monasterios familiares*.

¹⁶ See also Davies, *Competition for control of churches*.

churches¹⁷. Similarly, Bishop Rosendo and Abbot Novidio of Samos contended for the church of San Pelayo (*Villa Cesar*, Galicia) and its properties and dependants, as did Bishops Nausto of Coimbra and Sisnando of Iria for the church of Santa Eulalia (Silva Escura, Portugal) and its assets¹⁸.

Sometimes the attempts of lay aristocrats and ecclesiastical institutions to appropriate local churches and monasteries ran into resistance. The people of Santa María de Amoreiro (Galicia), one of the few community churches attested in NW Iberian charters from this period, appointed a priest called Agabius to serve the church¹⁹. Agabius breached the conditions of his tenure and eventually granted the church to the monastery of Santa Cruz, allegedly forced by the latter's religious community. The people of Santa María appealed to Count Gutier, his wife Ilduara, and their son, Bishop Rosendo, who ruled in their favour and declared them and their church free of any obligations – even if the appeal itself expresses some form of political subordination²⁰.

This case also shows that in order to make their claims over a church or a monastery effective, owners and patrons depended upon the loyalty of the tenants and clergy they appointed, and that this could waver in the face of pressures exerted by third parties. This was also the case of Abbess Fernanda, head of San Pelayo de Piñeira (Galicia), a monastery founded by her ancestors, but which had always been under the patronage of Samos, until a woman named Oneca eventually persuaded Fernanda to grant the monastery to her²¹. In this regard, the death of a tenant or appointed cleric was always a particularly delicate moment, as it opened up the possibility for different parties to pursue their claims. The anxiety that this could generate among owners and patrons is expressed in a charter recording the appointment of a priest to S. Martinho de Vila Nova de Sande, a dependency of the monastery of Guimarães (Portugal)²². A clause in the text specifies that whoever is appointed after the death of the incumbent priest, whether a relative of his or not, should remain faithful to the community of Guimarães, revealing the danger of Guimarães's patronage over S. Martinho being contested at that stage.

Sometimes donors tried to reassert their rights over churches and monasteries they had previously donated. A monk named Sancho founded a monastery dedicated to Santa Eufemia, in Biniés (Aragon), which he later granted to San Juan de la Peña²³. He was eventually appointed by the abbot of San Juan

¹⁷ Samos44 (975).

¹⁸ Samos126 (960); DEPA186 (906).

¹⁹ Cel59 (934?). Loring García, *Nobleza e iglesias propias*, pp. 100-105. Conflicts involving local communities are more frequent in later periods. See Alfonso, *Iglesias rurales*; Pérez, *Proprietary churches*.

²⁰ A reference to the services due to the bishopric of Orense, of which very little is known in the 930s, was most likely inserted at a subsequent stage, probably in the context of later conflicts between this bishopric and Celanova over the rents of various monasteries. See Andrade Cernadas, *El monacato benedictino*, pp. 183-185.

²¹ Samos76 (1011).

²² LM61 (1022). For the earlier history of the church, see LM60 (994).

²³ SJPU98 (1049).

to become abbot of the monastery of San Salvador de Olazabal (Gipuzkoa). Sancho then revoked his grant and turned Santa Eufemia into a dependency of San Salvador, a move that was contested by the abbot of San Juan. In another dispute, this one between the monastery of Santa María de Valpuesta and a priest called Analso, the witnesses swore that the latter had first joined the community of Valpuesta and that only then had he received the lands where he had built the church of San Millán de Gabinea (Castile)²⁴. The testimony implies that Analso claimed to have built the church on land that had belonged to him before joining Valpuesta, thereby asserting that the church belonged to him, and not to the monastery.

Conflicts could also arise between co-owners of churches, whose interests at times diverged as each party came to entertain potentially conflicting expectations²⁵. A priest called Letimio had to assert his rights over half of the church of Santa Eulalia against his co-heirs before he could grant it to the monastery of Santa Marina de Paradela (Galicia)²⁶. Similarly, in 957 García *Refugano* unsuccessfully contested the donation made by his brother, a priest named Obeco, to the monastery of San Pedro de Cardeña (Castile) of what appears to have been their family church, San Pedro de Tubilla del Lago²⁷. In a similar but much later case, from 1070, a man called Fortún Acenáriz was apparently met with greater success. He contested a grant made by Jimeno Acenáriz, almost certainly his brother, who had donated the church of San Miguel de Zuhatzu to the cathedral of Pamplona (Navarra). Even though he ultimately acknowledged that he held it not as his own, but rather by appointment of the bishop, he managed to retain control over the church²⁸. This evidences a further dimension of these conflicts: because being a client of a major ecclesiastical institution enhanced one's standing, for the relatives and descendants of the original donors, upholding this position could become an aim in itself. Indeed, the possibility that the relatives of a donor could eventually contest his or her grants is frequently envisaged in the sanction clauses of the charters²⁹.

Importantly, however, and notwithstanding these provisions and the structural weaknesses that we have so far considered, whether or not a conflict actually arose depended on more immediate factors. We can see how this plays out in a 992 record from the cartulary of Sobrado, which narrates a conflict over Santa María de Bonimenti (Galicia) between a priest called Christophorus and a certain Munio Gutiérrez³⁰. In a highly worked manner, the text recalls in detail how the church was founded under the patronage of Munio's grand-

²⁴ Valpuesta10 (911). Further conflict between Santa María de Valpuesta and Analso's successor over that church is attested in Valpuesta33 (956).

²⁵ Cf. García de Valdeavellano, *La cuota de libre disposición*. More specifically on the issues here considered, Orlandis Rovira, *Traditio corporis et animae*.

²⁶ Coruña50 (947).

²⁷ Cardeña90 (957). Cf. Orlandis Rovira, *Los monasterios familiares*, pp. 32-33.

²⁸ CP22 (1070); CP21 (1068).

²⁹ Mattoso, *Sanctio*, pp. 307-308.

³⁰ Sobrado130 (992).

parents, Vimara and Trudildi, and was overseen by the clerics Vistremiro and Gudesteo, who are thus presented as Vimara and Trudildi's clients. The most recent client cleric to oversee the church was the litigant Christoforus, a descendant of Gudesteo, and who served under the patronage of Gutier, son of Vimara and Trudildi and father of Munio. Christoforus and his brother had plotted against Gutier with the aim of claiming the church as their own, and saw their opportunity when some of Munio's relatives stripped him of his right to the church. However, when the case was taken to court and Christophorus was faced with testimonies supporting Munio, he relinquished his claim.

Conflicts over churches sometimes took a violent turn, which in some instances provided a means to gain control of them. Doña Jimena, for example, violently appropriated the monastery of San Salvador de Ferreira (Galicia)³¹. A certain Alfonso was also accused of attacking the monks at San Andrés de Congostro (Galicia) and appropriating the monastery³². A man called Vistrario tried to regain control of San Pedro de Mezquita (Galicia), which his uncle, also called Vistrario, had granted to the monastery of Celanova, by forcefully expelling its community³³. A similar move was made by the aforementioned García *Refugano*, and later also by Tello Muñoz, who expelled the community of San Pelayo de Morcuera, probably under the patronage of San Millán de la Cogolla (Castile)³⁴. In other instances, however, the aim is not clear, as the motives are not specified. A judicial record from 1005 presents a vivid description of the damage done to Santa María de Ribeira (Galicia) by a group led by one Domna Gontroda, who sacked the monastery, destroyed its treasure and left it in ruins³⁵. We may well imagine that this was a means to deprive a potential competitor of important resources, and might even speculate that it was another twist in the negotiation of a long-standing competitive relationship between the parties involved, although the reasons behind the attack remain obscure³⁶.

3. *Attacks against religious houses in early medieval León*

Now that we have had a look at the wider context for conflicts over religious houses in early medieval north-western Iberia, we can now concentrate on the cases specifically from León. In this area, donations of churches and monasteries to abbeys and bishoprics were frequent throughout the period, though they reached their peak in the central decades of the tenth century³⁷.

³¹ Samos-S10 (1001).

³² Cel260 (1001); Cel261 (1002).

³³ TCel548 (1012).

³⁴ BGD172 (1060).

³⁵ Cel292 (1005).

³⁶ On attacks against monasteries and competition between elites, see Le Jan, *Convents, violence, and competition*.

³⁷ Davies, *Acts of giving*, pp. 62-64.

This was at once an expression of and a factor behind the Kingdom of León's process of consolidation³⁸. In the second half of the ninth century, the kings of Asturias launched a series of military campaigns that afforded them nominal control over the north-western quadrant of the Duero plateau. In practice, however, royal power on the ground was patchy at best, and the monarchs relied on a series of lay aristocrats and ecclesiastical institutions that were themselves busy amassing their own estates in the area, sometimes across vast stretches of land. Churches and monasteries played a fundamental role in the construction of these estates, making land management and social control effective at the local level, and helping to build ties between the different scales of political power. Grants of churches and monasteries to bishoprics and abbeys fed into this process, fostering the integration of localities into wider territorial assemblages that were ultimately under royal control. By the mid-tenth century, the position of the kings in León was stronger, and at the time this was largely due to their patronage over such powerful ecclesiastical institutions³⁹.

Earlier studies have adopted a top-down approach to this process, attributing the initiative to the monarchs and their supporters⁴⁰. More recently, and in line with historiographical developments elsewhere, scholars have focused on the agency of local actors. It is understood that for the local elites, becoming a client of the king or of any other lay or ecclesiastical lord was a means to enhance their social position beyond the local scale, which is why they actively sought to establish such ties⁴¹. For many local elites, grants of churches and monasteries may have been instrumental in negotiating their entry into such client networks. These negotiations, and the presumed resulting consensus between the parties involved, have thus become a core focus of historiographical concerns over how relationships between central powers and localities were built⁴².

Local societies, however, were complex arenas in which different groups could hold contradictory interests, partly as a result of their own internal dynamics of social differentiation and competition, and partly due to the often unequal effects of overarching processes at the local level⁴³. What for some represented an advancement for others was a debasement, and the losers sometimes resisted their fate. Studies have usually focused on communal

³⁸ On local churches and monasteries as hubs of client networks and their role in the formation of the Kingdom of León, see Martín Viso, *Monasterios y redes sociales*.

³⁹ For a more detailed account of this process, see Carvajal Castro, *Bajo la máscara del regnum*, pp. 207-258. More broadly, for an overview of the role of churches, monasteries, and ecclesiastical networks in polity building, see the contributions to *Churches and Social Power*.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Sánchez-Albornoz, *Repoblación del reino asturleonés*.

⁴¹ Escalona, *De señores y campesinos*, p. 153.

⁴² Castellanos and Martín Viso, *The local articulation of central power*, p. 2.

⁴³ For NW Iberia see Portass, *Rethinking the "small worlds"*; Alfonso, *Exploring Difference*. Competition at the local level has been left out of recent assessments of such dynamics. Cf. *Coopétition*.

forms of resistance against the encroachment of kings, lay aristocrats and ecclesiastical institutions, but a closer look at local societies could enable us to unveil other lines along which local contention unfolded⁴⁴.

The information about conflicts over churches and monasteries comes from a handful of diverse records. Two are detailed accounts of disputes between the monastery of Sahagún and two different elite families, the relatives of priest Melic and the relatives of Abbot Lubila⁴⁵. Both occur in royal diplomas that were probably forged or at least heavily manipulated by Sahagún, most likely in the course of later disputes, and must be primarily considered as evidence of the disputation strategies that the monks deployed in such contexts, rather than as witnesses to tenth-century conflicts. There is also a small dossier of charters on a conflict over the monastery of Santa Lucía de Montes involving the religious community and two contending aristocratic families, which falls within the dynamics of competition between high-standing patrons that we have already seen⁴⁶.

The remaining four are the charters that interest us here. The first refers to the burning of Helyas and Sabildi's house. The account is part of a charter recording a sale copied in the cartulary of the cathedral of León (the original document has not been preserved)⁴⁷. It has been suggested that the account may have originally been «a note of confession added in the margin of an existing sale document in the court holder's possession», which would imply that the events occurred after the sale was made⁴⁸. The practice of using existing documents to make brief annotations concerning disputes is certainly not unattested⁴⁹. The passage, however, reads as one of many incidental accounts, sometimes written in the first person, inserted within charters otherwise following standard formularies of sale or donation, to explain why the transaction was made.⁵⁰ If this charter stands out, it is only because the contrast between the account and the rest of the formulary is very stark, with only a causal nexus at the beginning – «ob inde eo quod» – but no specific reference to the idea that the transaction was made on account of what had happened – «pro tali causa» –, as is found in other charters. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the price paid, 100 *solidi*, is exceptional for vineyards – a brief overview suggests that only around 10% of all the vineyards whose value can be assessed were worth 100 *solidi* or more, with around 85% being worth 40 *solidi* or less – and makes more sense in a judicial context, as will later be argued.

⁴⁴ The most comprehensive study on peasant resistance in NW Iberia continues to be Pastor, *Resistencia y luchas campesinas*.

⁴⁵ Si183 (960); Si276 (974).

⁴⁶ Ast70 (952); Ast71 (952); Ast84 (956).

⁴⁷ Lii360 (963).

⁴⁸ Davies, *Windows on justice*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ E.g. Si261 (971).

⁵⁰ E.g. Lii378 (964); OD187 (1028). See n. 6.

It is not self-evident that Helyas and Sabildi's house was effectively a church or a monastery, but there are several indications that this was most likely the case. To begin with, scribes in north-western Iberia were not as precise in referring to ecclesiastical buildings and communities as contemporary historians might wish. To be sure, they certainly wrote of *ecclesiae* and *monasteria* (literally churches and monasteries), but the difference between the two is not always clear, and these are not the only terms they used. *Casa*, which in common usage referred to a domestic building, is one such case⁵¹. Here, the *casa* housed a group of people under the authority of two named ecclesiastics, and thus was probably a religious community. The fact that its leaders were a male and a female should come as no surprise; mixed communities, or communities under the patronage of both male and female clerics, were common at the time. It was equally common for priests to provide pastoral care to female communities, and to accompany leading religious women as they took care of their business⁵².

Such business could include judicial processes like the one that Helyas and Sabildi initiated by appealing to Fruela Vélaz. In tenth-century León, judicial procedure was well established⁵³. Courts were a common forum for conflict resolution and followed similar proceedings, probably inherited from Visigothic times⁵⁴. Redress of grievances came in the form of a compensation to the offended party, and fines for wrongdoings were common in criminal procedures. For example, the wounds inflicted on the people held in the house against their will, and the damage caused to the house and its goods, were assessed at 190 *solidi*, which probably represents the compensation that Lupi was expected to pay to the other party. Moreover, whatever the type of case, the offenders could also face fines payable to the judicial authorities intervening in the process⁵⁵. These are sometimes stated in the sanction clauses of the charters, both in *solidi* as well as in weight units of gold (pounds and talents). However, in tenth-century León no coins were minted; those that reached the area from elsewhere had a very limited circulation, and in any case the amounts were frequently beyond what most people could have possibly paid⁵⁶. Rather, it seems to have been the case that monetary penalties provided the basis for negotiating fines that in practice were usually satisfied with land⁵⁷.

⁵¹ Loring García, *Nobleza e iglesias propias*, pp. 90-93.

⁵² For an overview of church and religious history in early medieval Spain, see Fernández Conde, *La religiosidad medieval en España. Alta Edad Media*.

⁵³ On the judicial process in León see Prieto Morera, *El proceso en el Reino de León*.

⁵⁴ For a recent survey of judicial institutions and practice in early medieval NW Iberia, with reference to previous scholarship on the issue, see Davies, *Windows on Justice*.

⁵⁵ On the distinction between compensation and fine, see Mattoso, *Sanctio*.

⁵⁶ See Davies, *Sale, price and valuation*, pp. 161-162.

⁵⁷ Carvajal Castro, *Secular Sanctions*. See also Luis Corral and Pérez Rodríguez, *Negotiating fines*, pp. 9-11; Martínez Sopena, *La justicia*, pp. 255-258.

In the charters such transactions are sometimes presented as sales⁵⁸, as is the case at hand, which appears in a charter recording Lupi's sale of a vineyard to Fruela Vélaz, the judicial authority in the dispute. The price, 100 *solidi*, was a standard sum for monetary penalties in tenth-century charters, and is significant for another reason as well⁵⁹. In Visigothic law, which remained a legal reference in tenth-century northern Iberia, the penalty for theft committed in churches was 30 *solidi* for low-status offenders and 100 *solidi* for high-status offenders. Fines for domestic break-ins, by contrast, were set at just 30 *solidi*⁶⁰. While this further suggests that the *casa* was not an ordinary house, there remains the question of whether Lupi's social standing could justify the higher fine. Although determining the status of lay individuals mentioned in tenth-century charters is often impossible, here there is a contextual hint. Lupi appears as the leader of the other men, which could indicate that he was a man of a certain standing – or else that he was portrayed as such in order to have the heavier fine imposed upon him. Ultimately, therefore, different clues suggest that this *casa* was indeed a church or a monastery.

Beyond this, there are references to another three cases for which we only have very brief narratives of the events. In 946, a certain Mateo and his *minores*, most probably his followers or dependants, attacked the *minores* of Berulfo and Sisebuto, both of them clerics from the monastery of Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón, and expelled them from the church of San Esteban, in *Villa de Mazul*⁶¹. This is the only case in which there is a hint that the ultimate aim was to gain control of the church, though this is not specified in the charter. The other two cases report attacks against clergymen. In 964, Rapinato, allegedly drunk and driven by the devil (two factors that also show up in other ecclesiastical discourses on wrongdoers), alongside his wife and sons broke into a dependency of the monastery of Sahagún located in *Villa de Petro*, killing a monk named Cartario⁶². Lastly, that same year, Teodomiro, from the village of Melgar, drove a lance through the arm of Álvaro, another monk from Sahagún⁶³.

These three cases, as well as the burning of Helyas and Sabildi's house, share a number of features. First, they all occurred between the mid-940s and the late 970s. As we saw before, these were decades in which church donations were most frequent, but were also a time that saw the active consolidation of the social and political structures of the kingdom, thus limiting the opportunities for social mobility that had been available to local elites in prior decades. Indeed, the disputed churches and monasteries were all local-

⁵⁸ Cf. Davies, *When gift is sale*.

⁵⁹ On the amounts at which fines were set see Carvajal Castro and Escalona, *The value of status*.

⁶⁰ On the influence of Visigothic law in tenth-century judicial and scribal practices see Bowman, *Shifting Landmarks*, pp. 33-55; Collins, *Sicut lex Gothorum continet*. On theft against churches, see LV IX.3.3. On break-ins, see LV, VIII.1.

⁶¹ Li192 (946).

⁶² Si218 (964).

⁶³ Si218 (964).

ly based, although two of them already functioned as dependencies of two abbeys, Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón and Sahagún, and in a third case the monk attacked was a member of the Sahagún community. The only one for which no patronage tie is specified is Helyas and Sabildi's house.

With the exception of Teodomiro, the attacks were all carried out by groups of people, some of whom may have been relatives, led by male individuals. None of them can be identified as an aristocrat, but they seem to have enjoyed a certain standing locally. Teodomiro belonged to Melgar's local elite, and Mateo owned land in Marialba, his attack against San Esteban in *Villa de Mazul* displaying a capacity to act beyond the confines of the locality where he was based⁶⁴. We have no further information about Lupi and Rapinato, but given their role as leaders of men we can suspect that they also enjoyed a similar position.

Further similarities can be gleaned from the contexts in which the attacks occurred. Teodomiro's took place five years after Sahagún had acquired the substantial properties that Iscam and Filauria, a local couple, had acquired in Melgar over the previous decades⁶⁵. The accumulation of land in the hands of the couple may have relegated other local elites, limiting their opportunities for further upward mobility. While in different circumstances their death could have led to the fragmentation of their estate, this was precluded by Sahagún's move to consolidate these holdings under their domain. The monastery's presence in *Villa de Petro* was also recent. When the monk Cartario was killed, only a year had passed since the monks acquired their first property there⁶⁶. As for Mateo, his attack against San Esteban de Mazules may be related to the donation of the latter to Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón three years before, though we cannot identify any prior relationship between him and the church or its former owners⁶⁷.

The attacks thus occurred in local contexts in which the situation had recently been altered by the irruption of a strong lord with an increasing local presence⁶⁸, a presence that found a material expression in churches and monasteries at a time in which these played a significant role in the hierarchisation of Leonese society. They may therefore express a reaction against the local effects of those wider structural changes⁶⁹. If this was so, it was a resistance articulated not by whole communities but by certain groups of people within the localities.

⁶⁴ On Teodomiro, see Carvajal Castro, *Los castros de la meseta del Duero*, pp. 24-25. Mateo and his brother Revelio appear as witnesses in Marialba in Li187 (944); Li236 (951), and can be found acquiring land there in Lii282 (954); Lii320 (951-959?).

⁶⁵ Si162 (959); Si164 (959).

⁶⁶ Si284 (976).

⁶⁷ Li176 (943).

⁶⁸ Cf. Wickham, *Looking forward*, p. 163.

⁶⁹ On the perception of social change and the articulation of resistance see Wickham, *Space and Society*, pp. 570-571.

4. *The local dynamics behind two killings*

Given that no further information is available for these cases, I will now examine two analogous episodes that took place in two well-documented localities, as they may provide us with further clues as to relevant local dynamics. The first of them is *Matella*, located by the river Esla in the territory of *Coianca*. In 937, Odoario Díaz, a nephew of King Ramiro II, was killed by a group of unnamed men. As a punishment, the king confiscated their properties and granted them to a man called Hermegildo⁷⁰. Fifteen years later, Hermegildo donated them to the monastery of Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón, which enjoyed strong royal support⁷¹. The charters recording these grants refer to the event in passing and provide no further details about it. With the information available, it is difficult to determine the nature of the group of people who killed Odoario. The first charter refers simply to murderers («homicidantes»), while in the second the crime is attributed to men from *Matella* («homines de uilla que uocitant Matella»). References to «men of» («homines de») any given locality are relatively frequent and may sometimes refer to local communities as a whole, but this is not always necessarily so – they can also refer to *some* men from the locality, rather than to *the* men of the locality. A literal reading of the charter, and the fact that it was individual properties («hereditates») that were confiscated, suggests that the killers were a group of people from *Matella* and not the entire local community.

The social landscape in *Matella* and its surroundings was rapidly changing in the central decades of the tenth century. Royal power was already firmly established in the area; nearby Fresno de la Vega is qualified as a *villa dominica* and there are references to a *domus* or *casa dominica* in the locality – most certainly a royal centre. The appointment of royal delegates as holders of the *villa* is attested for at least the late tenth century, and Ramiro II's nephew may have been there in precisely this capacity⁷². Around the 930s, two monasteries, Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón and Santiago de Valdevimbre, began to accumulate lands in the area⁷³. Although we know little about the properties of Valdevimbre, Ardón's acquisitions in *Matella* are well documented. It received land from a man called Benedicto as early as 932, and there is also a small dossier of charters attesting to numerous purchases between the 950s and the early 960s⁷⁴. A dependency of the monastery in the locality is also at-

⁷⁰ Li123 (937).

⁷¹ Li253 (952). For a history of the monastery, see Rodríguez Fernández, *El monasterio de Ardón*.

⁷² Liii741 (1016).

⁷³ Li93 (932); Li244 (952); Li245 (952).

⁷⁴ Benedicto's grant is recorded in Li93 (932). An exchange between the monasteries of Ardón and Valdevimbre is recorded in Li244 (952); Li245 (952). Acquisitions by Ardón are recorded in Li249 (952); Li250 (952); Li252 (952); Li253 (952); Lii267 (954); Lii271 (954); Lii281 (954); Lii292 (955); Lii307 (958); Lii317 (959); Lii325 (960); Lii338 (967); Lii342 (961).

tested in 955⁷⁵. As a result of these purchases, Ardón became one of the most prominent landowners in the area. The process involved many locals, some of whom sold or donated land to the monastery, while others acted as witnesses in transactions made on its behalf. However, not everyone joined in. In the list of people mentioned in the charters, the name of Fortunio Sánchez stands out. He owned lands adjacent to some of the those acquired by the monks, as well as a house in *Matella* and a *villa* in Fresno⁷⁶. These latter holdings suggest that he was someone with a certain standing. However, and contrary to other people who are mentioned recurrently in this corpus of charters, he never appears as a witness, nor do we find him selling or donating land to Ardón. His properties followed a different route and ultimately, and only indirectly, ended up in the hands of the monks of Pardomino⁷⁷. He thus seemingly kept his distance – or was kept at a distance – from the social network that Ardón built in *Matella*. This reveals a social divide in the locality, one that was at least partly defined by people's position in relation to Ardón. The monastery acted as a pole of social aggregation, while at the same time generating a pattern of exclusion. The situation in the 950s cannot be back-projected onto the 930s, but may be understood as part of the same process. The killing of Odoario may have resulted from tensions arising at its initial stages, when some, like Benedicto, were already benefiting from it, while others, like Fortunio, clearly were not.

The second locality is *Villacesan*, where in 1032, or sometime earlier, a man called Pedro was killed⁷⁸. He was a client of Fáfila Pérez, a member of a powerful aristocratic group known as the Fláinez, who claimed control over the locality⁷⁹. His killing took place during an *alfatena* (a term that usually refers to some sort of civil strife, from the Arabic *fitna*) in which Fáfila Pérez had remained loyal to the king, while a local woman called Jimena and her sons had joined the king's enemies⁸⁰. Jimena seized half of *Villacesan* and instigated Pedro's killing, which suggests she had a certain standing locally, with the capacity to assume a leadership role.

A number of charters attest to the lands that Pedro purchased from different people in the locality. Sometimes it is specified that he did so on behalf of Fáfila. In fact, some of the latter's plots were adjacent to those bought by Pedro, as if the strategy were aimed at expanding Fáfila's properties⁸¹. While Pedro's purchases served to weave an important social network in the locality, they also earned him the enmity of some inhabitants, where competition over land may have been a factor. Jimena, together with her

⁷⁵ Lii292 (955) and Lii317 (959).

⁷⁶ Li244 (952); Li245 (952); Lii267 (954); Lii325 (960).

⁷⁷ Liii526 (989).

⁷⁸ OD201 (1032).

⁷⁹ On this family group, see Estepa Díez, *Poder y propiedad feudales*; Martínez Sopena, *El conde Rodrigo de León*; Martínez Sopena, *Prolis Flainiz*.

⁸⁰ On the meaning of *alfatena*, see Martínez Sopena, *Reyes, condes e infanzones*.

⁸¹ OD83 (1010); OD88 (1012); OD106 (1016); OD107 (1016); OD130 (1021).

husband Abdella, owned plots adjacent to one bought by Pedro, so in this case the proprietary interests of the two parties may have collided⁸². In any case, before 1032 Pedro had already endured multiple attacks. In 1016, Espasildi granted Pedro a vineyard in compensation for the wounds that her son, Rodrigo, had caused him⁸³. Later, in 1022, the sons of Jimena and Abdella attacked Pedro's *cortes*, stealing cattle and clothing worth 300 *solidi*⁸⁴. Thus, regardless of the *alfatena*, which was the immediate context for the incident, the Pedro's murder seems to have responded to local tensions that had been mounting for years.

In the cases of both Odoario and Pedro, it is important to note not only who they were and what they did, but also what they embodied. In *Matella*, Odoario represented the king, who had a strong presence in the area and supported the monastery of Ardón, the force behind major changes in the locality. Similarly, Pedro acted as a delegate of the village lord, who was also seeking to expand his properties in the locality. In the latter's case, it is fair to say that his position was on public display in the locality. The purchases he made were formalised at meetings held before the local church of Santa María⁸⁵. His goods also expressed his social position: buildings, cattle, and clothes could function as status markers and were politically loaded, as was also the case with churches⁸⁶. Prestige goods, moreover, did not only materialise status acquired locally, but moreover were put within the reach of local elites through aristocratic patronage, and thus can be seen as an expression of the client networks to which they belonged⁸⁷.

From this perspective, the attack against Pedro's *cortes* and the theft of his cattle and clothes can be understood as an attempt to deprive him of such status markers and to deny his position. This may have parallels in the record in other references to thefts of prestige goods and clothes. For example, in a judicial record dated to ca. 1037, the killing of a man named Eitavita Ovéquiz coincided with the theft of a number of his brother's prestige goods, including furs, a lance, two helmets, a cuirass and a horse, all together worth nine hundred *solidi*⁸⁸. This may also explain some rather cryptic references to similar events, such as the theft of Císla's clothes by Mater in *Villar* in 993, about which no further information is provided⁸⁹. Stealing someone's prestige goods would not have deprived the person of other resources that may have

⁸² OD130 (1021).

⁸³ OD107 (1016).

⁸⁴ OD153 (1022).

⁸⁵ Five charters note that Pedro's purchases were formalized before the local council, and three specify that the meeting took place at the church of Santa María: OD83 (1010); OD88 (1012); OD106 (1016); OD107 (1016); OD130 (1021).

⁸⁶ On churches as politically loaded locations, see Provero, *Luoghi e spazi della politica*, pp. 124-128.

⁸⁷ Larrea, *Du Tiraz de Cordoue*.

⁸⁸ Sii451 (1037?).

⁸⁹ OD34 (993).

been equally important in upholding his or her social position, but would certainly have deprived that person of a fundamental aid in the construction and reproduction of authority at the local level.

5. *Conclusion*

By piecing together all the different fragments we have so far addressed, we can now assemble a plausible framework to explain this series of attacks on churches and monasteries. First, they took place at a time when major political changes were occurring, through processes in which churches and monasteries played a central role. For the local elites, they served as patrimonial centres and fostered their prestige locally, while also enabling them to join aristocratic and monastic patronage networks. For monasteries like Sahagún or Santos Justo y Pastor de Ardón, they provided a foothold in the localities, and contributed to the growth and management of their patrimonies, the articulation of client networks, and the consolidation of their authority at the local level. The latter could entail significant alterations in the distribution of land, the forms of social aggregation, and the sources of local power and authority. Some locals, and in particular some local elites, benefited from this. Others, however, saw their status debased and their prospects constrained, as it could severely limit their capacity to accumulate land, maintain or gain social support in the locality, and access patronage networks beyond its confines. Most attacks against churches and clerics in León occurred in contexts in which local equilibria had recently been upset by major monastic institutions, and may be understood as a reaction against such changes. Thus, while the events were ultimately related to wider processes of polity building, and serve to illuminate the political authorities' increasing capacity to exert justice at the local level, they must primarily be understood as reflecting the tension such processes generated on the ground.

The attackers were in most cases groups of people, relatives and non-relatives, led by individuals that can in some cases be identified as local elites. These groups may best be described as local factions, probably the ones that were losing out as a result of such changes. In all but perhaps one case – that of Mateo – no attempt to gain or retain control of the attacked houses is evident. The contention was not over an established situation, however recent, such as seeking social advancement through a local church or monastery. Rather, it appears to have been aimed at reverting changes that had deprived some inhabitants of the opportunities they had so far enjoyed. For the abbeyes, the loss and destruction of their local churches and monasteries entailed a significant economic and pastoral disruption, but also the destruction of a key instrument of territorial power and social control. For the local elites, it deprived them of a fundamental element in the local consolidation of their social position and authority. More specifically, this reveals a limit to negotiation and consensus in the construction of the Kingdom of León.

Ultimately, this attempt to explain this handful of events brings to the fore the rifts that could develop in local societies as a result of wider socio-political changes, and opens an avenue to further explore the effects of polity building in early medieval local societies. The strains caused by such processes could lead to the fragmentation of local societies, with warring factions coalescing around different leaders. This adds further texture to our understanding of the fabric of local politics in early medieval localities, reinforcing the idea that political action was not reduced to community action, and analysing some of the local collective dynamics that could take shape⁹⁰. The appearance or emergence of actors that occupied a contradictory position, as members of the local societies tied to the overarching socio-political frameworks – as was the case of local clerics, churches, and monasteries – entailed an alteration of the local political field that could be particularly resented, and could eventually lead to open conflict⁹¹. In such contexts, violence, in both its material and symbolic dimension, represented an intervention in local politics and political discourses that could be deployed to challenge the power relations as they unfolded, and which as such can be interpreted as an indicator of social disruption, rather than as a tool in the negotiation of social relations. This set of cases ultimately shows the potential of this series of incidental records to illuminate a side of local societies otherwise obscured by the dominant aspects of the extant sources. In this respect, it stands as an invitation to probe similar series of records, in order to pin down other dimensions of early medieval societies they might illuminate.

⁹⁰ Provero, *Abbazie cistercensi*, pp. 536-540; Provero, *Le parole dei sudditi*, p. 448; Provero, *A local political sphere*. On the difficulties of defining and assessing collective action at the local level in early medieval contexts, see Zeller, West, Tinti et al., *Neighbours and Strangers*, ch. 3.

⁹¹ For a recent comprehensive assessment of the social position of local priests, see the works collected in *Men in the Middle*. On local churches as the object of conflict and competition, see Davies, *Competition*; Mériaux, *Compétition*; Stoffella, *Ecclesiastici*; Stoffella, *La competizione*.

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